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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a recent study of the effect of television on racial and cultural attitudes of English Speaking Canadian preschool children, and describes a project planned to assess the interest value of a new prosocial documentary program and the program's effect on attitudes of 9- to 12-year-olds. The study already conducted had two parts. The first part examined whether a series of inserts into Sesame Street programs depicting children of other races in ethnic and integrated settings would result in more favorable attitudes toward children of other races. It was found that the English Canadian subjects preferred to play with nonwhite children rather than whites following the insert viewing. The second part of the study examined whether favorable attitudes toward French Canadian children would be achieved by depicting an attractive French Canadian child as central character in the inserts. Again, favorable attitudes were found following viewing. The planned study attempts to overcome a previous weakness in the research, which by using captive audiences gives results of limited generality. The plan is to assess the level of interest that 9- to 12-year-olds have in a prosocial documentary-type program which is intended to familiarize them with children of other races. Measures of attitude change will be taken after viewing as well as after discussion and writing about the film, to find out whether attitude change is enhanced by students' active involvement and rehearsal. (GO)

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Television's Impact: Changing Children's Attitudes in a Prosocial Direction

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Few institutions are as instrumental in support of our national social structure and character as is television. It is not surprising, then, that this medium is subject to criticism by so many concerned individuals and groups. But the extent and intensity of the criticism warrants the attention of those who have the capacity to influence the nature of television programming.

Many critics charge that the majority of television programming and advertising is antisocial in nature. Concern for the welfare of children has led to intensified efforts to assess the impact of these stimuli on child viewers. With regard to television programming, there is a wealth of evidence converging on the fact that children who watch the violent programs that still predominate on the airwaves do behave more aggressively. While the same array of evidence has not been amassed with regard to the effects of television advertising, such evidence as does exist (Goldberg and Gorn, 1974; Ward and Wackman, 1972) suggests that children are indeed influenced by TV commercials. Moreover, the charges that TV advertising contributes in an antisocial manner to the development of cynicism, frustration, and materialism on the part of children, while not documented by hard research seems intuitively more plausible than the contention that TV commercials operate in a prosocial sense to teach children the nature of the marketplace and our economy.[1] In response to these charges TV advertisers have established a set of guidelines including the reduction of commercial minutes per hour.

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1 We are currently engaged in a study investigating these variables.

Also encouraging is the evidence of increas. numbers of prosocial programs with both the commercial and public networks engaged in innovative program development. This is promising for as recent evidence indicates, exposure to prosocial programs such as Sesame Street and Misterogers Neighborhood increases such generally desirable traits as sharing, co-operation and self-control (Friedrich and Stein, 1975; Stein and Bryan, 1972; Stein and Friedrich, 1972; Walters, eat, and Mezei, 1963).

In addition, we have conducted an experiment to determine whether a series of inserts into Sesame Street produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and aimed at English Canadian preschool children, had the desired effect of creating more favorable attitudes towards:(a) children of several other races in Canada, and (b) French Canadian people and their culture (Goldberg and Gorn, 1976, in press). To investigate attitudes towards other races, this study employed inserts that dealt with other racial groups in a purely ethnic, non-integrated setting, and inserts where white and non-white children played together in a familiar setting. It was predicted that both sets of inserts would be effective in producing more favorable responses to non-white children for the following reasons: (a) the integrated and non-integrated inserts were both produced in an attractive manner and presented to the children through the powerful medium of TV, and (b) both would serve to increase the exposure of white children to other racial groups. It has been shown that mere exposure to a novel stimulus, in whatever context, produces increased familiarity and therefore liking of that object (Zajonc, 1968).

To investigate attitudes toward French Canadians, inserts with a single central character, either identifiable or not identifiable as a French Canadian, were used. As in the multiracial theme, both sets of inserts served to increase

exposure to an attractively presented child. Therefore, it was predicted that children would react favorably to this central character, who was called Richard, whether or not he would be recognized as French Canadian. The fact that an unfamiliar language (French) might be spoken would be relatively unimportant; other research on Sesame Street has indicated that while viewing the program, children, not surprisingly, pay more attention to what they see rather than to what they hear (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1972).

The inserts related to the multiracial theme did induce subjects to react more favorably to children of other races. It did not seem to matter whether or not the inserts themselves contained situations with which the child could more easily identify; the children were equally affected when they saw inserts with a group of non-white in an ethnic setting as they were when the inserts contained a racially mixed group interacting in a more familiar setting. In both cases, after exposure the children preferred to play with non-whites rather than whites. It may be that exposure to a novel stimulus (the non-whites), in attractive context, created more curiosity and interest than did exposure to an already familiar stimulus (the whites).

The fact that a substantial majority of the control group not exposed to these inserts preferred to play with white children supports the results of a series of studies, beginning with Clark and Clark (1947), which indicate that very young children would rather play with white puppets and dolls than black ones.

With regard to the French Canadian theme, all of the inserts, irrespective of whether they contained the central character, Richard, speaking or not, further increased Richard's attractiveness as a playmate. Given that Richard was liked so much when he did not speak French (88.5%), it would have been close to impossible to obtain a significant increase in liking when Richard did speak French. However,

while the children did not like him more, it is important to note that when Richard was recognized as a French Canadian speaking an unfamiliar language, they did not like him less. In conclusion, this experiment demonstrated that for both themes, minimal television exposure can produce very clearcut short term attitude change towards televised children of other racial and ethnic groups.

As the creative efforts of public and private networks come to be directed increasingly at fostering this kind of prosocial behavior in our young, many if not most of the voices of criticism would likely be stilled. Moreover, the advertising supporting such worthwhile programming would not likely be the target of as much criticism as is presently the case. However, at the present, a widespread view among many television critics is that programs are created primarily for purpose of holding the audiences until the commercial break. If sponsors were in the vanguard of developing programming "in the public interest" the public in turn would likely be a good deal more tolerant of their advertising efforts (as long as these were constrained by basic ethical guidelines); the many hours of prosocial television would so outweigh the minutes of commercials.

But the development of "good" television programming will not likely satisfy all the critics. For one thing the power wielded by the medium may be perceived of as increasing with this type of programming. The question then raised is, why should TV be allowed to so critically shape our children by determining which "desirable" traits and values are to be emphasized? Are "sharing" and "cooperation" the appropriate values to try to get children to emulate or for example, should they be"resourcefulness" and "independence"? Moreover the question should not be limited to whether value X and value Y is more appropriate for children to emulate. In a more general sense television can help teach children the appropriate psychological processes that would foster a flexibility and an openness to new

information. The decisions children make would then be more a function of the children themselves rather than of the views of those who shape even prosocial television. While program decisions are unavoidable influenced by value judgements it is preferable that agents of social change accept this responsibility rather than allow these influences to develop by default.

Some critics would go so far as to argue that "The best TV is no TV". These critics contend that extensive viewing of television encourages passivity on the part of the child and inhibits interpersonal interaction and the development of skills associated with these activities.

One possible remedy would be for the networks or parents to limit the amount of television children can watch. But given the dynamics of the television industry and the difficulty parents might have in restricting TV viewing, these would not appear to be viable options. With TV here to stay, what appears to be called for is the development of programming of a prosocial nature in conjunction with support material that encourages children to integrate their programming interests with other aspects of their activities. The goal should be to encourage non-TV situations that would reflect the same prosocial message as the TV program does. For example, a study by Freidrich and Stein (1975) follows up exposure to a Misterogers episode that stresses such values as helping, by having the children's teacher discuss the same topics immediately following the program. From a learning perspective their results suggest that this type of support material is quite valuable. From a programming perspective, it is also likely that many types of support material would serve to encourage continued interest in the TV program.

A high level of interest is, of course, critical to the success of the program. If children lose interest and turn their attention elsewhere, the value of the program is likely to be lost. And yet, few if any research efforts have treated this necessary condition. The typical approach (including the author's) has been to show a program to a captive audience and then measure for possible effects. But finding positive prosocial effects with a captive audience begs the question as to whether the program will be watched in the first place. Thus as a general rule, the entertainment and interest value of a program should be assessed, as well as, the intended prosocial effects.

To this end, we will be testing the development of a new prosocial documentary-type program which attempts to familiarize 9-12 year olds with children of other races and ethnic backgrounds. The problem is that children typically have a low level of interest in documentaries. This particular program, however, uses a rapid-action, story-telling format. We plan to assess the level of interest the children have in the program. Futher, the nature of the children's attitudes toward the portrayed characters and other members of the same racial or ethnic group will also be measured.

A test sample of subjects will be exposed to either one of these programs, or to a number of these programs over time. Delayed testing will be incorporated in addition to immediate testing, in order to determine long term attitude change.

We will also be incorporating conditions where children viewing the program will engage in a discussion and write stories about it to determine whether support information and active participation on the part of the child will enhance attitude change. The literature thus far suggests that rehearsal materials do, in fact, increase the effect of the program. (Friedrich and Stein, 1975)

Hopefully, if the program captures the children's attention because of its entertainment value and at the same time influences them in a prosocial direction, it will be a prototype for more such efforts in program development. With children as open and malleable as they are, television has considerable power to shape them. The way this is done is critical.

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